

# Sweetser's, 'the worst investment ever'

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When retired Hingham businessman Norman LeClair decided it made good economic sense to sell his 16-unit apartment complex in Dorchester, he looked around for something new to buy, and settled on the historic Sweetser's General Store building in Duxbury's Snug Harbor as a good investment.

That was in July 1988.

This is what he had to say in March 1989:

"It's the worst investment I ever made. I took a beating. The best I can do is cut my losses."

Right now, LeClair is trying to recoup some of his losses. He's just about rebuilding the grocery store, the contents of which he acquired, along with the liquor license for \$39,500 at a bankruptcy auction in February. He's replacing most of the refrigeration equipment and the rotted-out floors it stood on.

He hopes to open up everything but the butcher shop in mid-April. "I don't know anything about the retail business. But I've got to do something with the place," he said. One option is selling. If the right offer came along he'd consider it in a minute, he said.

He can be found every day but Sunday in the Washington Street store, working with his crew, cleaning out the place and filling up the industrial-size dumpster out back.

Had LeClair hung around the grocery store at Sweetser's much before he bought the building, he could have read the grimy handwriting on the wall.

The place was a pigsty, inside and out. Several of the freezers and refrigerators were broken. The health agent was a frequent visitor. The tolerant people of Duxbury, though, kept right on shopping there, evidently willing to overlook the third-world



sanitary conditions in favor of the nearby bottle of chardonnay.

Their tolerance, though, was not enough. The place closed in October and a short while later the owner initiated Chapter 7 bankruptcy proceedings.

Meanwhile, LeClair was out at least \$10,000 a month rent.

LeClair bought the two-story building, which  
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housed the grocery and liquor store, a bakery, a fish market, a flower shop and an apartment, for \$1.615 million from Duxbury Bay Realty Trust. The shops each belong to separate owners, who pay rent, as does the apartment tenant.

Sweetser's store and the bakery were owned by former Duxbury resident John "Jack" Turner, doing business as at least two realty trusts, one for the grocery store and the other for the bakery.

Turner had once owned the entire building. According to assessor's records, he bought the building in June 1985 for \$400,000, and turned around and sold it in March 1987 for \$1.315 million to Duxbury Bay Realty Trust.

Insiders gossip about those transactions, claiming that Turner paid twice as much for the complex and that the \$400,000 figure represents just the land and building. Equipment, liquor license and so forth, they say, were extra.

In any case, Turner arranged a 12-year lease with the realty trust, renewable every three years. Those conditions obtained when LeClair bought the building.

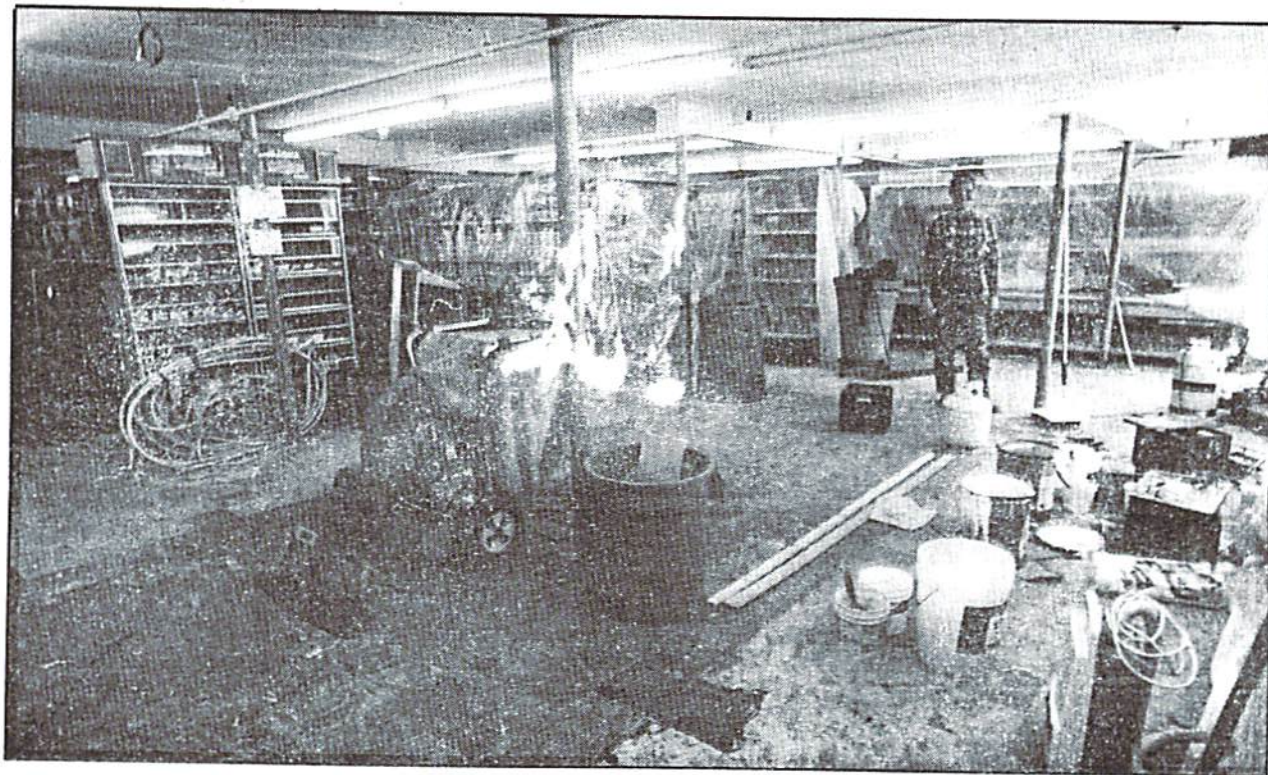
Sweetser's, over 100 years old, has been doing business on Washington Street as a grocery, liquor and meat store for a good many years, and LeClair determined that the business was sound — that is, food and liquor sales amounted to well over \$1 million a year, enough to sustain the monthly rent paid by Turner, just for the store.

The rents from all the tenants, LeClair decided, made Sweetser's a good investment, even though there's precious little that can be done with the place because of building code and parking restrictions.

But things began to fall apart for the new owner almost immediately.

"I got the July rent on time," LeClair said. "After that it was always piecemeal."

To add to his cash problems, the town required the installation of a new sewer system as a condition of the sale. That \$100,000 project was supposed to be taken care of by the previous owner, according to LeClair, who now says he has to sue to recover the



Someday, maybe by mid-April, this space will once again be Sweetser's General Store in Duxbury. (J. Paul MacDonald staff photo)

full price of the work.

The bakery went out of business in December.

The Sweetser's building represents a real business conundrum. It operates now on variances from the town. The zoning allows for neighborhood business use, but the property has nowhere near the parking area — one space per 100 square feet — it's supposed to.

While the downstairs space could certainly be used for offices, the high rents nearly dictate retail use.

The upstairs space that is not used for storage could lend itself to several uses, such as a small restaurant, but, again, there's not enough parking.

Jack Turner, who faces criminal and civil court actions, has left Duxbury. His debts to unsecured creditors alone amount to just about \$400,000.

LeClair thinks he'll never recover his money.

"If the townspeople patronize the store then it can be a success. But if they use it just to buy milk and bread, then it may never be a store again."